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Proper 12 • Ephesians 3:14–21 • July 26, 2015

How big are we talking? That might be a question that you have discussed if you have ever built a house or a church or any other kind of building. That is the question Paul seems to be addressing in Ephesians 3:14–21. In Ephesians 1 and 2, Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians that they are chosen in Christ and that they are saved by grace through faith, not through works. This is foundational for what seems to be Paul’s main concern in Ephesians: that is, should the church, the body of Christ, be for both Jews and Gentiles?

Paul makes a reference to the temple building in 2:14–16. While there had at one time been a building with a dividing wall to separate Jew from Gentile, there is no longer such a wall for those in Christ because the temple of Christ’s body was put to death on the cross and then raised so that there is only one new man, one new temple, that is, the one body of Christ. He brings back the imagery of a building in 2:19–22 to explain what the new building project looks like. The foundation is the apostles and prophets with Christ as the cornerstone. The recipients of the letter, though, both Jews and Gentiles are themselves being built into the dwelling of the Spirit of God.

Paul then pauses his discussion of the building to elaborate on his point about Gentiles also being included in the temple of Jesus’s body. In 3:1–13, Paul explains his ministry to the Gentiles and how his ministry relates to the history of God’s work in the world. In 3:14 he resumes his discussion and comes back to the imagery of the building. So when he gets to 3:18 and is praying that the Ephesian Christians would be able to “comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,” Paul is talking here again about the building. (George Stoeckhardt, a now sainted professor of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, agreed in his commentary on Ephesians.) Paul is praying that the Ephesian Christians will be able to see the blueprints, so to speak, for the new church construction project, that is the building project of the church of God, the body of Christ. Of course whenever you have a major building project, you always have to ask how big it will be, who will be allowed to use it, who will pay for it, and so on. Paul basically says that “it is too small a thing” (Is 49:6) if the church is only big enough for Jews. Paul prays that the Ephesians will be able to understand the massive size of the building project of which they are a part. And who will be paying for, working on, and completing this massive project? That answer comes in 3:20–21: the Lord of course, who is able to do more than we could ever imagine.

As you prayerfully prepare to preach this pericope, reflect on whether the congregation you shepherd has conceived of the building project of Christ’s church as too narrow, too short, too shallow, and too small. Has the congregation been hesitant to include a certain demographic in your neighborhood as the Jewish Christians were excluding Gentiles in Paul’s day? Take them through our great Lutheran distinctive of salvation by faith alone apart from works to help expand their perspective that the church, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as the cornerstone, is truly big enough to include all the family groups of the world, even in their own neighborhood.

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